Improving Affordability for Aggies:
Recommendations for OER Course Marking at Texas A&M

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Executive Summary

Texas A&M University faculty have been working to improve the affordability of textbooks and other course materials for students. These efforts are part of larger campus initiatives to support student success. In order to maximize the impact of this textbook affordability, students have to know that courses with affordable course materials are available. They must have the ability to use this information to make informed choices during registration. To achieve this, the TAMU class scheduling system needs modifications that will enable faculty to effectively communicate to students about courses using affordable course materials.

To further support student success at TAMU by providing transparency in the cost of course materials, we offer the following key recommendations:

- Texas A&M University should retain its existing **Open Education Resources Only** attribute, which is required by state law (TEC 51.452)
- In addition to the OER Only attribute, Texas A&M should add two additional attributes:
  - A **No Cost** attribute which would reflect that the course does not require purchase of course materials. This attribute would account for situations such as the use of a library-licensed textbook, instructor authored materials, or when there is no textbook required at all.
  - A **Low Cost** attribute which would reflect that the course requires the purchase of materials that, in total, cost **no more than $30**. This attribute would account for situations such as when some readings are available at no cost but students must purchase a novel or a pair of goggles.
- A definition or indicator should be included to ensure that faculty and students alike understand how to interpret these attributes. For example, the Low Cost attribute could read **Low Cost < $30**.
- The three textbook affordability attributes (**Open Education Resources Only, Low Cost < $30,** and **No Cost**) should become a single drop-down column in Howdy, separate from the rest of the Attributes.

These modifications to the class schedule in Howdy will support two important goals.

1. It will enable students to identify courses that are using OER and other no-cost or low-cost materials.
2. It will also ensure that assessment of campus textbook affordability efforts will capture not only the work of faculty who are using OER, but also those who are making their course more affordable by using library-licensed materials or who are using a combination of OER and low-cost materials (such as a homework site).

Many courses will not match any of these three attributes (Open Educational Resources Only, Low Cost, or No Cost). These recommendations are not intended to limit faculty academic freedom to choose the course materials that they deem most appropriate for their courses.

Introduction

In June 2023, Dr. Terri Pantuso convened a group of faculty members from the College of Arts and Sciences to participate in the American Association of College & Universities (AAC&U)'s Institute on Open Educational Resources. The participating faculty members, as well as their home departments, are listed below:

AAC&U Institute Team Member	Home Department
Terri Pantuso	English
Sarah LeMire	English
Alan Dabney	Statistics
Angela Hawkins	Biology
Fabiana Cecchini	Global Languages & Cultures
Rachel Hull	Psychology
Vanessa Coffelt	Mathematics
Verity McInnis	History
Leroy Dorsey	Communication
Kathy Anders	English

The project team members, in consultation with the AAC&U Institute team, identified several priorities for advancing OER work at Texas A&M University. One of those priorities was identifying ways to improve OER course marking efforts on campus. The following subteam was formed in order to explore best practices for OER course marking and make recommendations for changes.

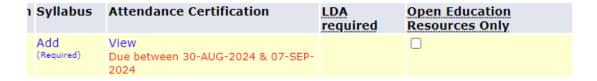| Course Marking Project Team Members |
|---|
| Sarah LeMire |
| Fabiana Cecchini |
| Verity McInnis |
| Terri Pantuso |

Overview

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the cost of textbooks in higher education. Due to financial constraints, students commonly avoid purchasing textbooks and other course materials. This disadvantages students academically, as they are limited in their ability to engage fully with course materials.

One increasingly popular solution to the problem of textbook costs is open educational resources (OER). OER is defined as textbooks and other learning materials that are openly licensed, meaning that instructors and students can use, share, and even adapt those materials at no cost. Although not available or appropriate for every course, many TAMU instructors, especially those of Core Curriculum courses, have begun experimenting with OER to improve the affordability of their courses. For example, ENGL 104, BIOL 111, MATH 150 and many other courses have resulted in student savings of millions of dollars.
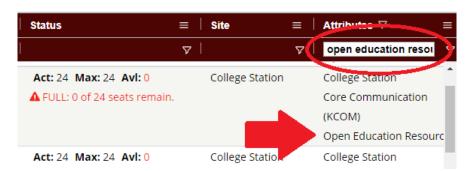
Current Course Marking System

In 2017, Texas S.B. 810 (now TEC 51.452) was passed as a measure to help promote OER by helping students find courses that use OER. The law requires Texas institutions to include a search function based on whether a course uses only OER. In compliance with this law, Texas A&M has an attribute in Howdy that marks courses as "open education resources only."

The **Open Education Resources Only** attribute is self-reported by faculty. Under the **Class Roster and Syllabus** link in Howdy, faculty members can check a box to indicate that their class is exclusively using OER.

On the student side, this attribute appears in the class schedule in Howdy. Students can see this attribute in the far right column in the class schedule and also can search for classes tagged as **Open Education Resources Only**.

Problem Statement and Rationale

The **Open Education Resources Only** course marker has grown increasingly popular at Texas A&M University. The number of courses marked has grown from a single course section in Spring 2017 to 497 course sections in the Spring 2024 semester. However, an [analysis of courses](#) marked as Open Education Resources Only in Howdy compared with posted course syllabi revealed that only 55% of courses marked as Open Education Resources Only in the Fall 2023 semester actually used OER, and only 15% used *only* OER. A large number of courses were marked as Open Education Resources Only if they were not using a textbook, if they were using library-licensed material, or if they were using information that was not openly licensed but was available at no cost to students. This finding suggests that the Open Education Resources Only attribute is not fully capturing the information about textbook costs that faculty members want to convey to students. Faculty members need additional ways to inform students about the expected textbook costs for their courses.

Methodology and Results

In order to examine alternative ways to inform students about anticipated textbook costs, the project team conducted a two-phase study. The first phase examined course marking systems at other institutions. The project team examined systems at other institutions in Texas as well as nationally. The results of this examination are available in the table below.

Institution	Course Marking Options

Houston Community College	Textbook Savings
	    Low Cost
	    Zero Cost
	    Inclusive Access

Louisiana State University	OER AER (no/low cost, less than 4x federal minimum wage <$29)
Oklahoma State University	Open Educational Resources

Oregon State University	Any Course Materials Cost (drop down)
	    No Cost $0
	    Low Cost <$40
	    No Cost $0 or Low Cost $40

Penn State	Course Attribute → Required Text Cost
	Course Attribute Value →
	    Low-cost Req Text (<$50)
	    No cost Req Text ($0)

Portland State University	Attributes & No/Low Cost Books (drop down) Low Cost Text Materials

	No Cost Text Materials
Roger Williams University	NoCo - No Textbook Cost
University of Colorado Boulder	Any Course Material Cost (drop down) 　　　　OER (Open Educational Resources) 　　　　Low Cost (<$20) 　　　　No Cost ($0) 　　　　No Cost, Low Cost, or OER
University of Houston	Open Source Low Cost No Cost
University of Kansas	No Cost Low Cost (<$45)
University of Oregon	Low Cost Materials (check box) (<$50) No Cost Materials (check box)
University of Texas at El Paso	Low-Cost Textbooks Zero-Cost Textbooks
West Virginia University	NOC (No-Cost Section) LOWC (Low-Cost Section) (<$75) OER (Open Educational Resources)

Following the review of peer institution course marking systems, the project team conducted an IRB-approved survey to better understand local needs. This survey was distributed to faculty and to students through several methods,including via campus listservs and requests for dissemination via department heads and course instructors. The survey was completed by 201 individuals, including 44 faculty members and 157 undergraduate and graduate students.

The survey asked faculty and graduate students about their preferred course marking options. The most popular course marking option for students was **No Cost**, while the most popular option for faculty was **Low Cost**.

Potential Attribute	Percentage of Faculty in Favor	Percentage of Students in Favor
OER Only	59.1%	66.2%
No Cost	63.6%	**70.1%**
Low Cost	**68.2%**	57.3%

Reduced Cost	40.9%	31.2%

The survey also asked faculty and students to identify their preferred threshold for "low cost" course materials. Faculty and staff differed in their preferred threshold; while faculty considered a $40 textbook to be low cost, students set a lower threshold of **$30**.

Meaning of Low Cost	Faculty	Students
Mean	$40.91	$31.60
Median	$40.00	**$30.00**
Mode	$50.00	$20.00

Recommendations

Based upon our examination of peer institutions and survey of Texas A&M University faculty and staff, we recommend the following changes to the University's OER course marking system.

1) We recommend that additional course markers be added to Howdy to better meet student and faculty needs.
   a) We recommend adding the **No Cost** course marker, which was preferred by students. The No Cost course marker would effectively inform students of the full suite of no-cost textbook options, including when their professor is using materials licensed by the library or is not using a textbook at all.
   b) We recommend adding the **Low Cost** course marker, which was preferred by faculty. The Low Cost course marker provides faculty members with a way to indicate that, while their course materials are not free, that the course materials fall under a threshold determined by students to be low cost. For the Low Cost course marker, we recommend that the threshold be set at **$30**. This number represents the average student opinion on what "low cost" means, and because students are the ones paying for the materials, their opinion on what is affordable should be prioritized over faculty perceptions.
2) We recommend that the **Open Education Resources Only** attribute remain in Howdy. This attribute was the second most popular attribute with students and is also important in order to remain in compliance with TEC 51.452.
3) We recommend that course markers include a definition or indicator to ensure that faculty and students alike understand how to interpret these attributes. For example, the Low Cost attribute could read **Low Cost < $30** so it is explicitly clear to both students and faculty what "low cost" means at Texas A&M University in terms of textbooks.
4) We recommend that the three textbook affordability attributes (**Open Education Resources Only, Low Cost < $30,** and **No Cost)** become a single drop-down column in Howdy, separate

from the rest of the Attributes. This drop-down function could allow students to filter results by one, two, or three of the textbook affordability attributes simultaneously. The recommended functionality is similar to the current **Section** drop-down in the class schedule in which students can select from any of the sections offered for a particular course. A similar model is [available at CU Boulder](#).

Further Considerations

Expanding the OER course marking system to include both no cost and low cost textbook options would help faculty members better represent to students the full scope of courses with affordable textbooks. However, it does not fully capture textbook affordability efforts by Texas A&M faculty. Some courses, due to course structure, disciplinary expectations, or pedagogical needs, use multiple course materials and exceed the $30 low cost threshold. Faculty members in these courses may make significant reductions in course costs by switching to OER or free/low cost alternatives for some of their course materials, but may still not fit the OER only/no cost/low cost definitions. For example, a language class may switch to an OER and thus substantially reduce the cost of course materials for that class. However, due to the cost of the required homework site for language practice, the course would still not fit the definition of low cost. When calculating OER cost savings and the impact of faculty work to improve affordability, these efforts should be included despite not appearing in the course marking system.

Conclusion

Instructors at Texas A&M University constantly seek ways to increase their commitment to program improvement that supports greater student success. Introducing OER/No Cost/Low Cost course materials is one of these ways. Indeed, the implementation of such materials offers many benefits in supporting student success by removing the cost barrier created by the requirement to purchase and review commercial textbooks, creating greater access to student learning outcomes, and improving course quality and student graduation rates.[1] Continuing efforts by instructors to offer OER/No Cost/Low Cost courses have a considerable impact. Providing a mechanism in Howdy for student selection of these offerings, in our opinion, is a vital step in supporting continuing student success.

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[1] [Textbook Broke: Textbook Affordability as a Social Justice Issue (wcupa.edu)](#); [7-IJTLHE 3386 (ed.gov)](#): [Why use OER? - Open Educational Resources (OER) - Research Guides at Texas A&M University (libguides.com)](#)